

**REGIONAL AFFAIRS:** York's program has placement shortfall

# Workfare funding in jeopardy

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Workfare, expected to put 300 York Region welfare recipients into permanent jobs this year, has met about one-tenth of that goal after eight months.

And the program's placement effort is bogging down because money it had to prepare its clients for a return to work has run out, regional officials said last week.

The province, which pays 80 per cent of the placement costs, might claw money back if the region's 300-job target isn't met, and achieving target is increasingly at risk, staff reported to the region's social services committee.

In fact, 17 people on welfare have been placed in jobs through a job database for the program, and 15 others placed without it, said Mario Calla, executive director of COSTI-ILAS, one of three local agencies signed to provide the program last November.

Another part of the program, one seeking to involve 450 clients this year as volunteers at community agencies, has also gone slowly. Welfare recipients have logged a total of 800 volunteer hours, although 133 placements are in development, said social services commissioner Joann Simmons.

The province made 50 changes to workfare regulations this year, and dealing with them is increasingly taking (staff) time away from the employment services component, the staff report said.

The program's agencies did 300 client assessments and found 144 people need retraining before they return to paid work, said committee chairperson Joyce Frustaglio, who complained

to the group that the province's rule against moving money from one part of the program to another "ties our hands."

"They must give us the flexibility and the proper tools to run the program as the need arises," she said.

But afterwards, Frustaglio, a regional councillor from Vaughan, maintained she is satisfied with the progress of workfare in the region, calling it a massive change that will take time to work.

The success of the program cannot be solely based on whether or not we are meeting our targets, she said, arguing that the program's existence has made welfare clients more active in pursuit of work.

As proof, Frustaglio pointed to the growing region's shrinking social assistance caseload, which, at 5,120 in July, was the lowest it has been since 1991.

By August, 4,700 people signed participation agreements to enter the workfare program, run for the region by COSTI-ILAS, Georgina Job Skills and the private First-Interactive Computer College.

COSTI had high hopes for the placement program. "We felt we could do 300 quite easily," said Calla. "We set a target we thought was doable if the people who were sent to us were job-ready."

But clients were finding jobs on their own and increasingly the program was handling clients with "mild to significant barriers to employment," like personal problems that will interfere with their ability to get focused or hold a job, said Calla. "This is the reality. They ended up on welfare for a reason."

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